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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse is being reported more often than ever before and counselors need to be prepared to serve victims of such abuse. In offering course materials and activities in master's level counselor education programs, instructors may notice a reluctance by some of the students to deal with these issues. This reluctance may be due to the fact that these students were sexually abused as children. These students, referred to as adults molested as children (AMACS), exhibit subtle signs such as depression, low self-esteem, over-compensation, anger towards their mothers, sexual adjustment problems, lack of memory of childhood, excessive resistance to experiential courses and activities, lack of trust, fear, and guilt. Ideally, victims should be encouraged to seek professional help. Since this may not be financially feasible for students, group support might be organized and sponsored by the counseling education organization. Students should be encouraged to feel that it is permissible to discuss sexual issues with a client. Films of counseling sessions may unblock a student's memories. Counselors will face these issues and they need to be prepared. (ABL)

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WORKING WITH COUNSELOR TRAINEES IN THE AREA OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

ABSTRACT

Teaching the Theory and Techniques of how to work with families who have experienced the disruption of reported child sexual abuse is a task which many counselor education programs are just now beginning to address. When counselor trainees reach the Practicum or even pre-practicum course, counselor educators are noticing reluctance in some of the students to deal with sexual issues, especially child sexual abuse issues, and with other "feeling" material. At the University of Nevada, Las Vegas counseling department, this reluctance has been found often to reveal the childhood abuse of that now-adult student. This paper suggests ways to detect possible child sexual abuse of adult counselor trainees and how to assist the student work through this long-buried trauma in the course of learning to work with clients.

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WORKING WITH COUNSELOR TRAINEES IN THE AREA OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Most Masters' level counselor education programs provide little training for working with families who have experienced child sexual abuse. Abuse is being revealed more frequently, followed by the legal necessity to report, followed by the almost total disruption of the family. Steadily increasing numbers of cases are being reported, and efforts at public education are resulting in more attitudes of rehabilitation rather than strictly punishment. Courts seem more willing to refer perpetrators, victims, and other family members to counseling. Members of such families sometimes appear at University counseling practica. While alert counselor educators may be assumed to be aware of this greatly increasing clientele, and incorporating techniques for assisting them into current courses, another phenomenon has surfaced in at least one counselor education program: that of the student counselor who was molested as a child, but did not reveal the molest at the time, and indeed is sometimes not even conscious of it, having apparently blocked it from present awareness.

The faculty of the counselor education program at The University of Nevada, Las Vegas began to be aware of the reasons that some students had great difficulty in dealing with feelings in the prepracticum class, called Theories and Techniques. This class is both didactic and experiential; several excellent theory students seemed to be unable to relate to their fellow students during experiential practice sessions, and unable to express their own feelings openly. While the instructors know that students progress on different time schedules, there was evidence that some otherwise very able students became very blocked when faced with some kinds of data and feelings from clients.

As instructors began to compare notes, and as the investigation progressed to include practicum students and their supervisors, the pattern which emerged was that many adult students had been sexually abused as children, but had not revealed this information, ever. As the patterns began to emerge, signs and symptoms became more obvious.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS SEEN IN ADULTS MOLESTED AS CHILDREN

Adults molested as children, referred to as "AMACS" present some detectable signs to the alert therapist or counselor educator. These signs in graduate student counselor trainees are often quite subtle and misleading, but it seems to be in everyone's best interest to recognize such students early in order to help them deal with unfinished business before attempting to counsel others.

1) One of the commonest symptoms experienced by AMACS is depression. An adult describing herself as a life-long victim of depression is to be considered as a possible child sexual abuse victim.

2) Very low self-esteem is encountered almost universally among victims, while they are children, and after they become adults. This is manifest in many ways in the adult (or teenager), including obesity, promiscuity, prostitution, and other self-abusive habits, including excessive substance abuse. The counseling graduate student infrequently overtly demonstrates low self esteem as flagrantly, but will articulate low self image in self put-down statements and excessive insecurity about the ability to get a good job, even when she is doing an excellent job.

3) Compensation for low self-esteem more frequently takes the form of over-compensation in the graduate student with a display of the need to be perfect in everything connected with her school performance. She does not tolerate mistakes in her performance, but continually discounts any compliments and positive feedback from others. She seems never to feel adequate, let alone, good.

4) Adult victims frequently retain an excessive anger toward mother, while expressing ambivalent feelings toward father. These ambivalent feelings are often slow to come out, and are more often detected in an unwillingness to talk about father.

5) Adult sexual adjustment problems are common among all child victims. Unwillingness to discuss sexual issues, theirs or a client's, can be a clue to early trauma. Among those who are willing to deal with the molest and talk about current sexual adjustment problems, a pattern of feeling sad and/or angry after adult sexual encounters, frequently manifest as a desire to cry, seems to be emerging.

6) Adults who were molested as children and never told anyone may not consciously remember the molest. While it seems obvious that therapists and educators must be cautious not to create a problem where there is none, a reasonably reliable sign of early trauma, predominantly sexual, is a professed memory blank of childhood before a certain age. Often the adult will honestly "not remember anything" about her life before age 6, or 8, or even 12. Long-term therapy, including careful building of trust and frequent relaxation sessions as well as dream work, can slowly unblock bits and pieces of early memory. The greater the resistance, frequently, the greater the trauma probably was.

7) More subtle signs among AMAC counselor trainess take the form of excessive resistance to experiential courses and activities. The instructor hears "I did not come here to be a client; I want to be a counselor and to help others." Fear exhibits itself as rigidity, not just in dealing with client or personal sexual issues, but also shown in moral attitudes and judgmental comments.

8) Lack of trust is obvious, but can take very subtle forms in the counselor trainee, including excessive anxiety about practicing being either client or counselor; insistence upon staying with the intellectual and not reaching feeling levels; closed to depth probing in herself or in the client. She is a

"private person" which often means secretive, as her family of origin in which the molest occurred, was very secretive.

3) Fearful: of what may be there, with a tendency to resist looking at it, especially if it was "long ago and forgotten." This is especially true of the adult who has really forgotten some extensive periods of her childhood. She often pleads that "if it is forgotten, I want to leave it that way, not bring it up now." While this fear is more than understandable, and the counselor educator must respect the student's right to privacy, the reality is that sexual abuse can never be "forgotten;" it will rise, sooner or later, in one form or another, to interfere with the ability to counsel. The student counselor's personal issues must be resolved before she can be effective with clients.

4) Guilt: feeling guilty for all manner of things over which she currently has no control, including whether it rains at the picnic or her client fails to show up for an appointment. Unresolved guilt feelings, universal in all child sexual abuse victims, continue, but are manifest in irrational guilt feelings in the adult, even the smart graduate student who "knows" she cannot be responsible for something, but "feels guilty anyway."

SOME WAYS TO HELP AMACS--especially as counseling students

Having recognized this common unresolved history in students in a counseling program, the faculty took some action to assist. Some ways that seem to be useful for these students:

The most obvious is the gentle suggestion that the individual seek professional therapy with someone experienced in working with these specific problems. While ideal, this is not financially feasible for all students, and legal restraints prevent mandating therapy; so additional supports were established within the program at UNLV. The (only) two female professors established a Women's Support Group for students. A modest fee was charged, by the semester, with the money going to the counseling department fund which buys tape recorders and similar items for the program. The instructors volunteered their time. The group met weekly for an hour and a half. Many support issues came up each semester, and the abuse as children came out and was dealt with in a safe, supportive atmosphere. This format had the double advantage of allowing the victims a forum in which to begin their work, and as a demonstration for the other students as the group leaders worked with each person. The women instructors additionally offered two all-day Saturday meetings during the semester, for the students who wished to attend a group, but could not come during the assigned time. Another session was made available by one instructor as a weekend-long Gestalt/TA training session. Several sexual abuse unfinished business issues emerged in the closeness of that group, as students took turns being therapist in a training format.

Work on values and attitudes is crucial in any counselor training

program, but is even more so for those who carry abuse issues. While no ethical instructor attempts to change a student's personal values, teaching clarification of values for clients must be prefaced by clarification of the student's values. Many old messages can be seen to be prejudices and erroneous assumptions as one learns to view them objectively.

Students need permission to challenge irrational beliefs about being "rude" or "prying" into sexual areas. Many students, whether sexually abused or not hold on to the irrational assumption that if a client does not wish to talk about an issue, it is rude or "nosey" to ask. This is especially true about sexual issues.

Watching tapes of actual counseling sessions (from practicum or any other source which can share confidential information for training purposes) often unblocks a student's memories and feelings around sexual issues. A processing discussion following the viewing of the tape is essential, as victims sometimes get in touch with a "feeling I can't quite describe, but it's familiar, and I don't know where it is coming from." This is a sign to the instructor that the student needs to find what the feeling is and indeed where it is coming from. If counseling session tapes are not available, or in addition to them, this counselor training program reports successful use of commercial films which tend to trigger old feelings. Something About Amelia, or Don't Touch, or Kids Don't Tell are some of our favorites. The viewer's becoming involved in a story, as all good theater exemplifies, tends to touch chords deep within the person. Working through personal trauma, whatever its nature, is made easier when these feelings are brought to the surface; film is one way to accomplish this awareness in all of us, not just victims.

Today's counselors have learned much by the time they receive their advanced degrees and credentials, but there is always more to learn. Even for some of us who had been in the field for decades and felt that we had "seen everything," sexual abuse has only recently become a major issue. Now we again feel we have heard it all; but tomorrow morning something brand new will probably walk through our door. As counselors, and as counselor educators, especially, we must be alert not only to "what is new," but to what our students are experiencing personally, from the past, and present, in order to prepare them to deal effectively with the whatever-is-new-and-comes-through-my-door. Teaching Theories and Techniques is necessary; it is only part of the job.